

GEORGE G. CAREY

A COLLECTION OF AIRBORNE CADENCE CHANTS

THE TEXTS included here were collected at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, the home of the 101st Airborne Division, in April of 1961. The idea for such a project reverted back to my own tour of duty as a parachutist from 1954 to 1956; aware that sung cadences prevailed among airborne soldiers, I thought it worthwhile to get some of these cadence chants on tape—something which to my knowledge has not been attempted before. Therefore, with help from the personnel of the Public Information Office at the base, who lent me a small transistor tape recorder, I was able to run beside the troops during their daily exercise and gather the material presented here.

By way of introduction it seems necessary to sketch in something about the 101st Airborne Division in general and the paratrooper in particular. The division's history, though short in span of years, reveals a number of achievements. Activated in 1942 as one of the first airborne groups in American Armed Forces' history, the 101st jumped both at Normandy and in Holland during the war prior to receiving a unit citation at Mourmelon, France, in 1945. Shortly after the Axis capitulated, the United States government deactivated the unit from airborne status, but reformed it again in 1956, when the 101st became one of the first divisions to be shaped into battle groups rather than battalions and regiments.¹

Ironically, little of the unit's outstanding background is reflected in the lore of the individual paratrooper. Many of the men who now make up the ranks of the 101st scarcely remember the Second World War. (the average age of the enlisted private is eighteen.) Their interests converge rather on the narrowness of their regimented existence—their rationed food, their training, their curtailed freedom, and their next jump. Yet the parachutist remains a rarity amid the overall conformity of Army life, for he has volunteered to jump out of a plane, and his training stresses physical fitness, fortitude, and mental alertness; consequently, the airborne soldier represents the army's finest fighting men. It is hardly surprising that the paratrooper himself believes he is the roughest, toughest bundle of "airborne hell" ever to pass through the doors of an aircraft. Airborne soldiers, like Marines, are noted for their devil-may-care attitude and their inbred *esprit de corps*. They possess one thing which elevates them above the miserable "straight leg" (non-jumping soldier): the touch of insanity it takes to step out of an airplane at fifteen hundred feet.

To accomplish this feat, however, the novice must suffer through three or four weeks of intensive training, climaxed in the final week by five consecutive jumps. At the end of this jump school the trooper receives his wings, the emblem of his prowess, and these, along with his jump boots, he treasures above all other belongings. His training complete, the new parachutist returns to his own outfit to begin the endless round of army life.

When off maneuvers, the airborne soldier's day usually follows a set pattern: up at five-thirty for muster; chow at six followed by calisthenics and a two to three mile

run; classes and training all day until four-thirty in the afternoon when the troops fall out once more for exercise and another extended run. It is on these long runs that the soldiers sing their cadence chants.

Sung cadence is not a new phenomenon of Army life. Airborne cadence-chants certainly go back to the inception of the paratrooper, though old soldiers are not able to say exactly how or when they started.

Cadence is sung to two distinct rhythms: the quick-time or march step and the double-time or running step. Airborne units employ the latter almost exclusively. In the words of one verse:

When I was young and in my prime,
I drink whiskey, I drink wine,
But now I'm in this great airborne,
All I hear is double-time.

The double-time gait is more a shuffle ("the airborne shuffle") than an out-and-out running stride, and the result is less demanding on the troops, since it allows them to run farther and sing longer.

Since calling cadence needs a leader who knows what he is doing, the company commander always orders a soldier (recognized as a cadence caller) from the ranks to lead the troops in cadence-calling. In my experience Negro boys have proved the best at this task. Their repertoires always seemed fathomless, their rhythm, impeccable—both invaluable factors. With marching precision the ultimate purpose of chanting, the leader must know on what foot to begin his chant so that his cadence will end correctly. For example:

Leader: You had a good home but you left.
Chorus: (You're right.)
Leader: Jody was there when you left.
Chorus: (You're right.)

Obviously the "left" and "right" in the verse must be spoken as the corresponding foot touches the ground. Similarly, the troops themselves affirm that another reason for chanting lies in morale building and mitigating the tedium of a seemingly interminable run. A man who knows a host of verses and a variety of tunes, who can mock the CO, the first sergeant, and the rival outfits with equal ease, and who is capable of amusing the troops with originality and wit, can in fact cheer the soldiers out of their distaste for double-timing. He is thus, as every sensible commander knows, an asset to any unit.

The particular tenor of the chant varies according to the rank of the leader. Officers and non-commissioned officers generally stick closely to conventional verse patterns.

Leader: If I die on the old drop zone,
Chorus: (repeat)
Leader: Box me up and send me home.
Chorus: (repeat)
Leader: Pin my wings upon my chest,
Chorus: (repeat)
Leader: Tell my mother I done my best.
Chorus: (repeat)

On the other hand, when soldiers of the line are called upon to sing cadence, they often express open derision in their remarks.

Leader: Our first sergeant he's got class.

Chorus: (repeat)

Leader: He's got a face like a bulldog's ass.

Chorus: (repeat)

Because of the extraordinary fluidity of the rhymed stanzas, it is difficult to deposit any chant in a named category. For instance, the so-called "Jody cadence," with its variety of verses, appears in a spate of airborne chants, each time with a different tune or accompanied by a new refrain. Still, it does seem worthwhile to point out the six major types of cadences since they do differ markedly in tune as well as refrain. Best known to the paratrooper is a short two or three syllable chant, seldom rhymed, and always sung to a double-time step. More often than not this type acts as a filler while the leader thinks up new rhymes.

Leader: All the way.

Chorus: (repeat)

Leader: Everyday.

Chorus: (repeat)

Leader: Airborne.

Chorus: (repeat)

Leader: In the door.

Chorus: (repeat)

Leader: Count to four.

Chorus: (repeat)

(etc. *ad infinitum*).

Equally familiar to the airborne soldier is the straight two or four line stanza, chanted at either the double- or quick-time step. The troops echo each line in unison.

Airborne, airborne, have you heard?
We're gonna jump from a big-ass bird

Stand up hook up, shuffle to the door.
Jump right out and count some more.

Main don't open gonna pull my reserve.
If that don't open gonna lose my nerve.

Yet another type often uses the same verses, but supplies a set refrain. Like the one above, this chant can be sung to both fast and slow cadence, and the troops repeat each line in unison.

Ain't no use in going to chow.

They never feed you anyhow.

Had a girl in New Orleans.

Fourteen kids and a can of beans.

It's the airborne [or Fort Campbell] boogie.

It's a crazy song.

It's the airborne boogie.

It's a crazy song.

A fourth pattern diverges from the routine with the troops supplying a separate chorus.

Leader: Sergeant, Sergeant, can't you see?

Chorus: Diddy diddy dum, dum dum diddy.

Leader: This old shit is killing me.

Chorus: Diddy diddy dum, dum dum diddy.

Two final chants, more familiar to civilian ears perhaps, appear only infrequently in airborne cadences, since they are not suitable to a double-time step. The "honey-babe" cadence has reached the populace through such mass media as movies and popular song.

Leader: I've got a girl in every port.
Chorus: Honey, honey.
Leader: Suing me for non-support.
Chorus: Babe, babe.
 I've got a girl in every port

Suing me for non-support.
 Honey, oh baby mine.
 Go to your left your right your left
 Go to your left your right your left.

A nondescript series of rhymes reflects the sorry side of army life in a humorous vein. Sung to a quick-time step, the chorus is a unison repetition:

The chickens in the army, they say are mighty fine.
 One jumped off the table, and chased a buddy of mine.

One need not look far to turn up genres of chanting which parallel the airborne cadence chant. Certainly sea chanties and Negro hammer songs not only served much the same purpose as these running cadences, but they also exhibit much the same pattern of oral delivery—a solo line with a choral repetition or refrain. Aside from simply easing the strain by taking one's mind off the labor, the work chant also produces cohesion among the participants. Where the nineteenth century sea captain realized he could get maximum effect when everyone hauled on "Leave her Johnny, LEAVE HER," so the airborne company commander knows that the troops will run better and more efficiently when someone calls cadence for them. Yet in both cases it must be noted that the oral accompaniment followed only incidentally after the fact; that is, the task to be performed was there long before the chants came into existence, and though the latter serve a purpose somewhat beyond the role of simple entertainment, they are not crucial to the performance of the task itself.

To try to extract a function inherent in the chants themselves seems somewhat far-fetched. To be sure, there are indications in the verses of a distaste for army life, hints of apprehension over parachuting, and reflections of suppression and regimentation. But to say that every soldier who hawks these cadence chants indulges himself in the thoughts and fears which they suggest is to mangle the truth. Equally tenuous is the notion that these chants as a whole, by humorously deriding the airborne experience, dispel the fears of each individual by illuminating the light side of an otherwise hazardous occupation.

The chants given below were collected for the most part from members of the 187th Airborne Battle Group, one of the numerous battalion-sized groups which make up the division force. Here the chants were called by a variety of men from the ranks, and it was impossible to establish exactly who led each cadence. The second group of chants comes from the repertoire of one Negro soldier, Sergeant Charles Moore. Aged twenty-five, Moore had been with the airborne since he entered the service six years earlier. A short stint with the Airborne Color Guard augmented his already large collection of verses and perfected his cadence calling.

In this collection, unless otherwise indicated by parentheses, the troop response is a unison repetition of the verse, line by line. The chants are given exactly as they were recorded. Although in fact the chants are all run together when sung, for clarity's sake I have divided them into verse patterns where I felt a natural break occurred.

TROOPS OF THE 187TH BATTLE GROUP

Our first sergeant he's got class He's gotta a face like a bulldog's ass.	All the way All the way
--	----------------------------

Every night before retreat
Our first sergeant beats his meat.

Two old maids a-layin' in the bed
One turned over to the other and said:
"Drive on
All the way."

Oh that Jody boy
Droppin' down the avenue
Airborne is the place for you.²

I'll be drinking wine
You'll be pullin' time.³

Stand up, hook up, shuffle to the door
Jump right out and count some more.
If your chute don't open right
You'd better pray 'cause you're gonna die.⁴

If I die on the old drop zone
Box me up and send me home.
Pin my wings upon my chest
Tell my mother I done my best.⁵

I had a girl away out west
Thought this airborne life was best.
Now she's someone else's wife
And I'll be running for the rest of my life.

Engineers
In the rear
All the way
Everyday
Rakasan⁶

Umba
Umba
Engineers
In the rear
Straight leg
Everyday
Gotta go.

Mary had a little sheep
With that sheep she went to sleep
It turned out to be a ram
Mary had a little lamb.⁷

All the way
Everyday
Airborne
Airborne
All the way.
Nancy, Nancy look so fine
Your breath smells like turpentine.

I know why you look so fine
You have both [*sic*] been drinkin' wine.

All the way
Everyday
Everyday
All the way.

Sergeant, sergeant, can't you see
This old shit is killin' me.

Going down to the railroad track
Catch that train and I ain't comin' back.
Am I right or wrong?
(you're right)
Am I right or wrong?
(You're right)
Sound off
(Airborne)
Sound off
(Airborne)
Break it on down
(A-I-R-B-O-R-N-E)

All the way
Everyday
All the way.

Heidy heidy heidy ho
Hoddy hoddy hoddy hi
It's the Fort Campbell boogie
It's a crazy song.

I don't know but I've been told
Eskimo pussy's mighty cold
It's the crazy women
It's a crazy song.⁸

Oh when the saints
Oh when the saints
Oh when the saints go marching in,
Oh I want to be in that number
When the saints go marching in.

Oh when the moon
Oh when the moon
Oh when the moon is shining bright,
Oh I want to be in that number
When the sun begins to shine.

Oh when they crown
Oh when they crown
Oh when they crown him King of Kings,
Oh I want to be in that number
When they crown him king of kings.⁹

Airborne, airborne, have you heard?
 We're gonna jump from a big-ass bird.¹⁰
 Stand up hook up shuffle to the door
 Jump right out and count some more.
 Main don't open gonna pull my reserve¹¹
 If that don't open, gonna lose my nerve.

If I die on the old drop zone
 Box me up and send me home.
 Pin my wings upon my chest
 Tell my mother I done my best.

Biscuits in the army
 They say are mighty fine.
 One rolled off the table
 And killed a buddy of mine.

Coffee in the army
 They say is mighty fine.
 It's good for cuts and bruises
 And tastes like iodine.

The pay in the army
 They say is mighty fine.
 They give you fifty dollars
 And take back forty-nine.

The turkey in the army
 They say is mighty fine.
 One jumped off the table
 And chased a buddy of mine.

The chickens in the army
 They say are mighty fine.
 One came in the army
 And killed a buddy of mine.

The girls in the army
 They say are mighty fine.

You ask for Betty Grable
 They give you Frankenstein.

Shoes in the army
 They say are mighty fine.
 You ask for number seven
 They give you triple-nine.¹²

I don't know but did you hear?
 My little sister sounded [?] queer.
 Airborne

I gotta a girl and she sucks dicks
 She's gotta brother in the 506.

I gotta girl she is a whore
 She's gotta brother in the 504.¹³

I gotta girl who lives on a hill
 She won't do it but her sister will.¹⁴
 If she's still there when I get back,
 I'm gonna get that Cadillac.
 If I re-up for three more years,
 She's gonna be in a bucket of tears.
 Am I right or wrong?

(You're right)

Am I right or wrong?
 (You're right, etc.)

Your left, your left

Your left right left
 Your left right left.
 Oh left-O right-O ring out the mopt-O
 Left-O right-O left.
 Your boots are up
 Your pants are tight
 Your balls are swinging from left to right.
 (Troops repeat all three lines together.)

CADENCE CALLED BY SGT. CHARLES MOORE

ALL RIGHT, SOUND OFF. NEXT TIME I CALL CADENCE I WANT TO HEAR YA LOUD AND CLEAR!

You had a good home but you left
 (You're right)

Jody was there when you left
 (You're right)

Am I right or wrong?
 (You're right)

Am I right or wrong?
 (You're right)

Sound off
 (One two)

Sound off
 (Three four)

Break it on down

(ONE TWO THREE FOUR
 ONE TWO THREE FOUR.)

I don't know but I believe
 I'll be home by New Year's Eve.

Am I right or wrong?
 (You're right)

Hear me if I'm wrong
 (You're right)

Am I right or wrong?
 (You're right)

Hear me if I'm wrong
 (You're right)

- You left your wife and forty-eight children
Way out in the kitchen in starving condition
With nothing but ginger-bread left.
(You're right, you're right, you're
right)¹⁵
- Am I right or wrong?
(You're right)
- Hear me if I'm wrong.
(You're right)
- You had plenty of money when you left
(You're right, you're right, you're right)
- You gave it to your honey when you left
(You're right, you're right, you're right)
- Left that girl at home
(You're right)
- Thought was all alone
(You're right)
- Call her on the phone
(You're right)
- Jody had her and gone
(You're right)
- You don't give a damn
(You're right)
- You work for Uncle Sam
(You're right)
- Am I right or wrong?
(You're right)
- Hear me if I'm wrong
(You're right)
- Hey, hey what do ya say?
(Repeat)
- The Delta Demons are here to stay.¹⁶
(Repeat)
- Had a girl in New Orleans
Fourteen kids and a can of beans.
It's the airborne boogie
It's a crazy song.
- Second lieutenants are at it again¹⁷
Winning the war with a fountain pen.
It's the airborne boogie
It's a crazy song.
- Wacs and waves are winning the war¹⁸
What the hell are we fighting for?
It's the airborne boogie
It's a crazy song.
- Cadence cadence cadence COUNT
(one)
- Marching down the road
(two)
- Singing as we go
(three)
- If we're gonna try
(four)
- Try for TDY¹⁹
(one two three four
one two three four
one two three four.)
- COME ON NOW, SOUND OFF
- Lilly got married in the fall
(Diddy diddy dum, dum dum diddy)
- Had a little Willy Junior and that ain't all.
(Diddy diddy dum, dum dum diddy)
- Our first sergeant is a WAC
(Diddy diddy dum, dum dum diddy)
- He carries kotex in his pack.
(Diddy diddy dum, dum dum diddy).
- Sergeant, sergeant, hear my plea
(Diddy diddy dum, dum dum diddy)
- A three day pass is all I need.
(Diddy diddy dum, dum dum diddy)
- There's one thing that I can't stand
(Diddy diddy dum, dum dum diddy)
- Bowlegged woman and a straight-legged
man.
(Diddy diddy dum, dum dum diddy)
- Head and eyes up off the ground.
- Six to the front and three to the rear
Hand in the pocket and shift your gear.
- Sergeant, sergeant hear my plea
My poor feet are killing me.
- Birdie, birdie, in the sky
Drop that white wash in my eye.²⁰
- Gosh oh me, oh gosh oh my
How can that little birdie fly?
- When you hear the bugle sound
Up you jump and hit the ground.
Wash your face and comb your head
Stand so tall you think you're dead.

Locomotive count it out
 Marchin' down the road
 Singing as we go
 If we're gonna try
 Try for TDY
 And if we don't win
 It will be a sin.

Ain't no need in lookin' down
 Ain't no discharge on the ground.

Ain't no need in turnin' back
 Jody's got your Cadillac.

I don't know but I've been told
 Jody's wearing your one-button-roll.²¹

Lift your head and hold it high
 Company C is passing by.

We don't care if you don't sleep
 Sit on the bunk and tap your feet.

Gotto go
 Geronimo
 In the door
 Count to four
 All the way
 Everyday
 Gonna run
 Up the hill
 Blood
 Guts
 Growl
 Whiskey
 Women
 Straight leg
 No good
 No good
 Airborne
 Real good
 Gotta run
 All day
 Can't quit
 A little hill
 A big hill
 Drinkin' wine
 In the door
 Count to four
 All the way
 Airborne
 No good
 Airborne
 So good

Airborne, airborne, where you been?
 Round the world and gone again.
 What you gonna do when you get back?
 Run around again with a full field pack.

When I was young and in my prime,
 I drink whiskey, I drink wine.
 Now I'm in this great airborne
 All I hear is double-time.

Stand up, hook up, shuffle to the door
 Seems I've heard those words before.

Your hard left, your hard left, your left
 right left.

If I die on the Russian front,
 Box me up with a Russian cunt.

Pat your head and count your feet
 This airborne beat just can't be beat.

Cadence airborne one two
 Silence oh three four
 Knock it on out
 Do it again, once more
 That's enough
 You can stop.
 Hold your nose and hold it tight
 (Honey honey)
 Third battalion's on our right
 (Babe babe
 Hold your nose and hold it tight
 Third battalion's on our right
 Honey oh baby mine
 Go to your left your right your left
 Go to your left your right your left.)²²

I don't know but I believe
 (Honey honey)
 I'll be home by New Year's Eve
 (Babe babe, etc.)

I don't know but I've been told
 (Honey honey)
 Our old man is growing old
 (Babe babe, etc.)

Higher up the berry tree
 (Honey honey)
 Sweeter grows the berry
 (Babe babe, etc.)

I gotta gal in every port
 (Honey honey)
 Suing me for non-support
 (Babe babe, etc.)

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive history of the 101st Airborne Division from its inception until 1946 see Leonard Rapport and Arthur Northwood, Jr., *Rendezvous with Destiny* (Washington, 1948).

2. The Jody cadence crops up in any branch of the army where the troops march. Jody is that mythical figure who stays at home and, after the soldier has been inducted, steals his girl, his liquor, and runs off with his clothes and his Cadillac.

3. To "pull time" is merely to serve out a service stint. "Time" can also be "pulled" in the stockade, but that is "bad time," i.e., it fails to count towards discharge.

4. In the plane the jump-master gives the five commands: GET READY! STAND UP! HOOK UP! (at this point, the men attach their static lines to a cable inside the plane—and the static line pulls the chute out of the paratrooper's backpack when he exits the craft), CHECK YOUR EQUIPMENT! SOUND OFF FOR EQUIPMENT CHECK! When the green light flashes on, the troops shuffle to the door and exit. As soon as he leaves the aircraft, the trooper counts, "One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand" at which time he should feel the opening shock of his chute as it fills with air.

5. In the Michigan State University section of the Indiana University Folklore Archives under "G. I. Army Songs," an interesting variant of this stanza appears:

If I break my scaphoid bone,
Strap me up and send me home.

6. *Rakasan* is the Japanese word for paratrooper.

7. This appears frequently as an off-color "Mother Goose Parody." Parallel versions and variants from Massachusetts, Indiana, and Michigan can be found in the Indiana Archives.

8. See the Michigan State section of the Indiana Archives, "G. I. Army Songs." Here the verse reads: "I don't know but I've been told Eskimo women are mighty cold." Also, listed under "College Songs" one finds a refrain added:

I don't know but I've been told,
Eskimo pussy's mighty cold.
(Hey bob-a-re-bob
Hey bob-a-re-bob, yes, your daddy knows.)

9. Often heard on college campuses, these verses actually stem from an old hymn. See *Old Songs Hymnal*, ed. Dorothy Bolton and Harry Burleigh (New York, 1929). The version in this volume comes from Georgia.

10. The "big-ass bird" in this case is the C-119, a miserable excuse for an airplane termed by the paratroopers "The Flying Boxcar." It vibrates so badly in flight that one is usually happy to remove oneself, one way or another.

11. Parachutists carry two chutes, a backpack which in theory opens automatically, and a reserve chute, worn on the belly, which must be pulled manually if the first parachute fails to blossom.

12. The Michigan State section of the Indiana Archives contains more than a dozen of this type under "G. I. Army Songs." Army beds, boots, rifles, officers, and pancakes all come in for ridicule. For a close variant on the army chow verse see Agnes N. Underwood, "Folklore from G. I. Joe," *New York Folklore Quarterly*, III (1947), 287-288. She says that similar verses are also part of songs debunking Navy life. In his *American Folklore* (Chicago, 1959), 275, Richard M. Dorson mentions that these lines are sung to the tune of "Old Chisholm Trail." He includes a chorus:

I don't like Navy life.
Gee Mom, I want to go
Right back to Quantico
Gee Mom, I want to go home.

Parodies on the army verses can be found in a number of college songs in the Indiana Archives. In the Michigan State section, stanzas describing dormitory life at the university as well as the rigors of campus life at Sullins and Stephens Colleges offer a wide variation on a fixed theme. Under "College Songs" in the Indiana University division of the archives, a verse sung at nurses' training school is worth quoting:

The chickens at St. Mary's
They say are mighty fine.
The nuns get all the white meat
And I get the behind.

13. The 504th and the 506th Airborne Battle Groups are rival outfits of the 187th.
 14. A version in the Michigan State section of the Indiana Archives contains the same lines with a "Hey bob-a-re-bob/Yes, your daddy knows" chorus. Under "Bawdy Songs" from Indiana University, the archive has a similar version with a "Hey lolly lolly/Hey lolly lolly lo" chorus. Under "G. I. Airforce Marching Songs" the same verse occurs along with a number of others, for example,

I gotta gal in Boston, Mass.
 She's got freckles on her ass.

I gotta gal in New York City
 She's got freckles on her titty.

15. A variant of this cadence can be found in the Michigan State section of the Indiana Archives under "G.I. Army Songs."

16. "Delta Demons" is the nickname for the 187th Airborne Battle Group.

17. For parallel versions see the Michigan State section of the Indiana Archives under "G.I. Army Songs." The verse also appears in versions of "Mademoiselle from Armentieres." See *G.I. Songs*, ed. E. A. Palmer (New York, 1944), 72 ff.

18. Palmer, 72 ff.

19. TDY is Temporary Duty, usually associated with an easy job, no marching, no details, and no maneuvers.

20. A similar version of this crops up in the Michigan State section of the Indiana Archives under "G.I. Songs."

21. Indiana Archives. In this version a refrain is appended:

I don't know but I've been told
 (Way in the middle of the night)
 Jody's wearing your one-button-roll.
 (So get along little dog-face get along
 While the moon is shining bright
 Get along boys, up the river road
 We're gonna raise a ruckus tonight.)

22. The archives under "Air Force Marching Songs" include ten variants with the same chorus and refrain. Hollywood has made good use of the "honey cadence" in war movies, and recently the cadence has been heard as a popular song.

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NOTICE OF MEETINGS

On the fourteenth and fifteenth of May, 1965, the Purdue University English Department will sponsor a Mid-America Conference on Literature, History, Popular Culture, and Folklore. Persons interested in attending should write to Professor Ray B. Browne, English Department, Purdue University, Lafayette, Indiana.

The California Folklore Society will meet on the ninth and tenth of April at the University of California, Los Angeles. Program chairman is Professor Donald Ward, Department of German, University of California, Riverside.